

Message Text

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INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15
USIA-06 EB-07 OMB-01 TRSE-00 IO-13 ACDA-07 SIL-01
LAB-04 /091 W
-----091655Z 097703 /41

R 091605Z MAY 77
FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3639
INFO AMCONSUL BELFAST
AMCONSUL EDINBURGH

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT, PGOV' UK
SUBJECT: TORIES SCORE SWEEPING GAINS IN LOCAL
ELECTIONS

REF: EDINBURGH 083

SUMMARY - MEETING GENERAL EXPECTATIONS, THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY REGISTERED DRAMATIC GAINS IN THE EARLY MAY LOCAL ELECTIONS. IN ENGLAND, THE TORY VICTORY, WHICH REACHED LANDSLIDE PROPORTIONS IN SOME AREAS, WAS LARGELY AT THE EXPENSE OF THE LABOR PARTY, THOUGH LIBERALS AND INDEPENDENTS LOST HEAVILY AS WELL. IN SCOTLAND, WHERE THE ELECTIONS WERE HELD MAY 3, THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY (SNP) TOOK THE LARGEST SHARE

OF THE SPOILS, BUT BOTH THE TORIES AND LIBERALS ACHIEVED NOTEWORTHY GAINS. MOSTLY AT LABOR'S EXPENSE. LABOR ALSO SUSTAINED SIGNIFICANT LOSSES IN WALES, ITS BEDROCK AREA OF SUPPORT. WITH THE TORIES AND PLAID CYMRU BEING THE PRINCIPAL BENEFICIARIES. NATIONWIDE, THE
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SWING AGAINST LABOR FROM THE LAST GENERAL ELECTION WAS CALCULATED AT 12.9 PERCENT WHICH TRANSLATED TO PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION TERMS WOULD BE ABOUT 8 PERCENT, AND WAS CLEARLY LABOR'S WORST LOCAL ELECTION PERFORMANCE IN 10 YEARS. THE OUTCOME OF THE LOCAL ELECTIONS SHOULD HAVE NO DIRECT EFFECT ON THE GOVERNMENT'S ABILITY TO REMAIN IN POWER. BUT W/L NO DOUBT REINFORCE CALLAGHAN'S

CURRENT STRATEGY OF HOLDING ON AS LONG AS POSSIBLE IN THE HOPE OF REGAINING THE ADVANTAGE WHEN (AND IF) THE EXPECTED ECONOMIC UPTURN ARRIVES. END SUMMARY.

1. THE LABOR PARTY, AS HAD BEEN ANTICIPATED, TOOK A HAMMERING IN THE MAY 3 AND 5 LOCAL ELECTIONS. THE CONSERVATIVES ENJOYED A NET GAIN OF 1135 LOCAL GOVERNMENT SEATS IN ENGLAND AND WALES TO ADD TO THE 37 THEY GAINED IN SCOTLAND. THIS RESULT BROKE LABOR'S HOLD ON 21 METROPOLITAN AND COUNTY GOVERNMENTS IN THE UK, INCLUDING THE GREATER LONDON COUNCIL (GLC). A SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS, BY AREA, FOLLOWS:

-- ENGLAND - THE CONSERVATIVES SCORED A MAJOR VICTORY WHICH REACHED LANDSLIDE PROPORTIONS IN SOME AREAS -- NOTABLY GREATER MANCHESTER -- WINNING A NET 1063 LOCAL-LEVEL SEATS AND OUSTING LABOR MAJORITIES IN 12 METROPOLITAN AND COUNTY GOVERNMENTS. THE TORIES GAINED CONTROL OF 11 LOCALITIES -- GREATER MANCHESTER, MERSEYSIDE, WEST MIDLANDS, WEST YORKSHIRE, GREATER LONDON, CLEVELAND, DERBYSHIRE, HUMBERSIDE, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE, NOTTINGHAMSHIRE, AND STAFFORDSHIRE -- LEAVING LABOR IN CONTROL OF ONLY THREE -- SOUTH YORKSHIRE, TYNE AND WEAR, AND DURHAM. THE CENTERPIECE OF THE TORY TRIUMPH WAS THE GLC, WHERE A 14.8 PERCENT SWING TO THE CONSERVATIVES BROUGHT THEM 64 OF 92 SEATS. IN ENGLAND, THE LIBERAL LOSS OF 161 SEATS WAS EVEN WORSE THAN LABOR'S SETBACK IN RELATIVE TERMS, VIRTUALLY WIPING THEM OUT AT THE LOCAL LEVEL. VARIOUS INDEPENDENTS AND MINOR PARTIES LOST 143 SEATS. ONE SLIGHTLY DISTURBING ASPECT LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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OF THE OUTCOME IN ENGLAND WAS THE NEO-FASCIST NATIONAL FRONT'S (NF) SHOWING -- WHILE WINNING NO SEATS, THE NF PICKED UP NEARLY 120,000 VOTES IN LONDON AND PUSHED THE LIBERALS INTO FOURTH PLACE IN SOME DISTRICTS OF LONDON, LEICESTER, AND WOLVERHAMPTON. ON BALANCE, LABOR'S LOSSES WERE SOMEWHAT GREATER THAN HAD BEEN EXPECTED.

-- SCOTLAND - LABOR WAS ALSO POUNDED IN SCOTLAND, THOUGH THE RELATIVE MAGNITUDE OF ITS DEFEAT WAS LESS AND THE MAJOR BENEFICIARY A DIFFERENT PARTY, THE SNP. WITH SOMETHING OVER 1300 LOCAL SEATS AT STAKE, THE SCOT NATS PICKED UP A TOTAL OF 99 NEW SEATS WITHOUT CONTESTING ALL SEATS IN THE REGION. THE TORIES GAINED A RESPECTABLE 37 SEATS, THE LIBERALS A SOMEWHAT SURPRISING 13 AND THE SCOTTISH LABOR PARTY ONE. OVERALL, LABOR DROPPED 121 SEATS AND INDEPENDENTS LOST 28. LABOR, MOREOVER, LOST CONTROL OF GLASGOW AND ABERDEEN (BUT REMAINED THE LARGEST PARTY IN BOTH), MIDLOTHIAN (TIED WITH THE SNP AS THE LARGEST PARTY) AND CLYDEBANK (SNP THE LARGEST PARTY). GENERALLY, LABOR'S LOSSES WERE

SLIGHTLY LESS THAN ANTICIPATED, AS WERE THE SNP'S GAINS. BOTH THE TORIES AND LIBERALS DID BETTER THAN EXPECTED.

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USIA-06 EB-07 OMB-01 TRSE-00 IO-13 ACDA-07 SIL-01
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-- WALES - LABOR LOST 79 SEATS AND WAS FORCED TO GIVE UP CONTROL OF 2 LOCALITIES, WHILE THE LIBERALS LOST 7 SEATS. THE TORIES PICKED UP A NET 64 SEATS, NEARLY DOUBLING THEIR SHARE OF THE WELSH ACTION, PLAID CYMRU PICKED UP 15 AND VARIOUS INDEPENDENTS GOT 7. THE RESULT LEFT LABOR IN CONTROL OF ONLY TWO OF WALES' 8 LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND THE LARGEST PARTY IN ONE OTHER (INDEPENDENT SLATES RETAINED CONTROL IN THREE OTHERS). THE CONSERVATIVES GAINED CONTROL OF SOUTH GLAMORGAN (CARDIFF AREA) AND BECAME THE LARGEST PARTY IN CLWYD. IN GENERAL, LABOR'S PERFORMANCE WAS A BIT BETTER THAN EXPECTED, THE CONSERVATIVES' ABOUT ON THE EXPECTATION MARK AND PLAID CYMRU'S SLIGHTLY WORSE.

2. MARGARET THATCHER AND OTHER TORY LEADERS ARE PRE-DICTABLY JUBILANT, PARTICULARLY OVER THE GLC RESULT. INITIALLY, MRS. THATCHER REPORTEDLY CLAIMED THAT THE RESULT WOULD IMPROVE THE PROSPECTS FOR AN EARLY ELECTION, BUT SUBSEQUENTLY CHANGED HER TUNE ONLY TO NOTE

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THAT "PEOPLE CAN NOW LOOK FORWARD TO A TIME WHEN THERE WILL BE A CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT." LABOR PARTY GENERAL SECRETARY RON HAYWARD, NO DOUBT HOLDING HIS HEAD IN HIS HANDS, REFLECTED THAT THE OUTCOME DEMONSTRATED THE GOVERNMENT'S CURRENT UNPOPULARITY AND WAS DUE PRINCIPALLY TO THE STEADY RISE IN PRICES. HOME SECRETARY MERLYN REES TOOK A LONGER VIEW, ARTICULATING THE GOVERNMENT'S CURRENT POLITICAL STRATEGY: "OUR AIM NOW IS TO WORK TOWARDS VICTORY IN THE GENERAL ELECTION OF 1978 OR 1979". LIBERAL LEADER DAVID STEEL, HIS PARTY APPARENTLY IRREVOCABLY LINKED WITH THE GOVERNMENT, DECLARED, "WE ARE NOT GOING TO BE DEFLECTED BY A TEMPORARY SETBACK". IN SCOTLAND, SNP SPOKESMEN EXPRESSED SATISFACTION WITH THEIR SHOWING, WHILE THEIR COUNTERPARTS IN WALES CLAIMED MERELY THAT PLAID CYMRU HAD BECOME THE "RADICAL ALTERNATIVE" TO THE LABOR PARTY ESTABLISHMENT.

3. COMMENT: THERE CAN BE NO DOUBT THAT THE LOCAL ELECTIONS WERE AN IMPORTANT POLITICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL VICTORY FOR THE CONSERVATIVES AND REAFFIRMED THE CURRENT LOW STATE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S POPULARITY. THIS HAVING BEEN SAID, THEIR NEAR-TERM POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE IS PROBLEMATIC. TRADITIONALLY, PARTIES IN GOVERNMENT LOSE HEAVILY IN MID-TERM LOCAL ELECTIONS, AND THESE WERE THE FIRST SUCH ELECTIONS SINCE 1973-74 WHEN THE CONSERVATIVES' POPULARITY WAS AT OR NEAR A NADIR. LABOR, ACCORDINGLY, THIS TIME AROUND HAD TO DEFEND SWEEPING GAINS SCORED THEN, AND THE RELATIVE POSITIONS WERE REVERSED. THE NORMAL LOW TURNOUT FOR LOCAL ELECTIONS (GENERALLY IN THE 40 TO 50 PERCENT RANGE) TENDS TO UNDERSTATE LABOR'S SUPPORT -- PSEPHOLOGISTS RECKON THAT LOCAL ELECTION RESULTS HAVE A TORY BIAS OF ABOUT 5 PERCENT. IF THIS IS THE CASE, THE EXTENT OF THE SWING AGAINST LABOR, IN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION TERMS, WOULD BE BETWEEN 7 AND 8 PERCENT, CLOSE TO LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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THE CONSERVATIVE ADVANTAGE REPORTED IN THE RECENT MARKET AND OPINION RESEARCH INTERNATIONAL (MORI) POLL. THUS THE LOCAL ELECTION RESULTS SEEM TO CONFIRM THE MOST RELIABLE POLL DATA.

4. THE LOCAL ELECTION RESULTS WILL NO DOUBT REINFORCE

CALLAGHAN'S STRATEGY OF HOLDING ON TO POWER AS LONG AS POSSIBLE IN THE HOPE THAT AN ECONOMIC UPTURN AND GROWING NORTH SEA OIL REVENUES WILL RESTORE LABOR'S POLITICAL FORTUNES. THIS, AS WE HAVE INDICATED EARLIER, IS SOMETHING OF A LONG SHOT, BUT THE ONLY REAL OPTION HE HAS FOR THE MOMENT. THE RESULTS, EXCEPT IN SCOTLAND, ALSO REINFORCE PERCEPTIONS THAT THE LIBERALS ARE CLOSELY IDENTIFIED WITH THE GOVERNMENT AND ARE PAYING A POLITICAL PRICE FOR THIS LINKAGE. THEY TOO WOULD SEEM TO HAVE LITTLE CHOICE BUT TO LEAVE THEIR LIMITED POLITICAL CURRENCY RIDING ON CALLAGHAN'S LONG SHOT. AND ON THEIR HOPE TO BE ABLE EVENTUALLY TO DEMONSTRATE TANGIBLE LIBERAL INFLUENCE ON IMPORTANT GOVERNMENT ACTIONS. THUS IT SEEMS TO US UNLIKELY THAT THE LOCAL ELECTION RESULTS WILL HAVE A NEAR-TERM IMPACT ON THE GOVERNMENT'S ABILITY TO RETAIN POWER, UNLESS A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF EXTREME LEFT-WINGERS SHOULD DECIDE TO SATISFY THEIR LATENT SELF-DESTRUCTIVE INSTINCTS.

5. THE OUTCOME IN SCOTLAND CAN ONLY GRATIFY THE SNP, EVEN THOUGH IT WAS NOT UP TO THEIR EXPECTATIONS. HAD THE SNP OPTED TO CONTEST ALL THE LOCAL SEATS, IT PROBABLY WOULD HAVE EMERGED AS THE SECOND LARGEST PARTY

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USIA-06 EB-07 OMB-01 TRSE-00 IO-13 ACDA-07 SIL-01
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IN THE REGION -- THE TORIES NOW CLAIM THAT DISTINCTION, WITH LABOR RETAINING AN ADVANTAGE OF NEARLY 100 SEATS. LABOR, WHICH RIGHTLY REGARDS THE SCOTLAND RESULTS AS A SERIOUS BLOW, EXPECTS THE BURDENS OF OFFICE TO TARNISH THE SNP'S POPULAR IMAGE, JUST AS OCCURRED WHEN THE SNP GAINED CONTROL OF SEVERAL LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN 1969. BUT THIS MAY PROVE A FORLORN HOPE, GIVEN THAT PARTY'S GROWING POLITICAL SOPHISTICATION AND MATURITY. IT IS NOTEWORTHY, HOWEVER, THAT THE SWING AWAY FROM LABOR IN SCOTLAND WAS GREATER THAN THE SWING TOWARD THE SNP, SUGGESTING THAT ECONOMIC ISSUES WERE AS MUCH A FACTOR AS DEVOLUTION OR SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE.

6. IN SUMMARY, THE LOCAL ELECTIONS SEEMED TO DO LITTLE MORE THAN CONFIRM WHAT HAD BECOME INCREASINGLY OBVIOUS -- THE GOVERNMENT'S POPULARITY IS LOW; THE LIBERALS ARE SUFFERING, PARTIALLY BECAUSE OF THE ACCORD WITH THE GOVERNMENT; THE TORIES ARE THE PRINCIPAL BENEFICIARIES OF THESE CONDITIONS; AND SNP CONTINUES TO LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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STRENGTHEN ITS POSITION IN SCOTLAND. YET AN EARLY PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION SEEMS UNLIKELY. ASSUMING NO CHANGE IN VOTER ATTITUDES BETWEEN NOW AND THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION -- A TENUOUS ASSUMPTION -- THE CONSERVATIVES WOULD RETURN TO POWER WITH A SUBSTANTIAL OVERALL MAJORITY, BUT FACE A STRONGER, MORE ASSERTIVE SNP IN SCOTLAND.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01-Jan-1994 12:00:00 am
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: ELECTION RESULTS, LABOR RELATIONS, POLITICAL PARTIES
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Sent Date: 09-May-1977 12:00:00 am
Decaption Date: 01-Jan-1960 12:00:00 am
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1977LONDON07594
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D770162-1047
Format: TEL
From: LONDON
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
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Legacy Key: link1977/newtext/t19770579/aaaacqgs.tel
Line Count: 313
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
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Message ID: 9b7a4698-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION EUR
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 6
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 77 EDINBURGH 83
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
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Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 2597859
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: TORIES SCORE SWEEPING GAINS IN LOCAL ELECTIONS
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, UK
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odhc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/9b7a4698-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009